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ABSTRACT

Endeavoring to combat the persistent problems of low achievement, poor reading skills, and nagging absenteeism, the Intermountain Inter-Tribal High School, an American Indian boarding school in Utah, developed a project whose primary mission was to reduce substantially the number of students scoring below the acceptable norm in grade equivalency on oral language skills. The preliminary phase of the project, conducted during the 1981-82 school year, collected the following data on student learning needs: test scores from the Oral Language Test of the Southwest Cooperative Educational Laboratory, test scores from the California Achievement Test, and student perception scores of their own native language speaking and understanding ability and of their English speaking and understanding ability. Analyses of scores produced the following preliminary findings: (1) most students admitted to the oral language project really were deficient in language skills (many of those in the ninth grade tested at sixth grade reading levels); (2) there was a positive correlation between student reading level, overall language ability, and oral language proficiency; and (3) most students were moderately proficient in their native language, with some indications of language interference problems due to the learning of English. (RL)

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IMPROVING ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR AMERICAN INDIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Lack of language preparedness is a common problem endemic to all levels of schooling. It is especially harmful in secondary schools which have more traditional academic orientations. As the number of students with reading, language arts, speech difficulties and learning skills' deficiencies accumulate in any given teacher's classroom, the problem becomes acutely exacerbated. Trained as a subject matter specialist, the teacher is suddenly faced with students whose basic learning deficiencies she or he is not trained to remediate. It is a cyclic pattern, and one which confronts an uncomfortable number of secondary schools, especially those which have large bilingual or non-English speaking student populations.

The language deficiency is, of course, compounded in schools for American Indian children and youth. The problem is associated with low proficiency in the native dialect or language, as well as a lack of development of language learning skills at an earlier age. The recognition of failure also leads to a lack of motivation for further schooling, and to potential crisis in cultural and ethnic identity.

Intermountain Inter-Tribal High School is the largest American Indian boarding school in the United States. It is located in Brigham City, Utah, about 60 miles north of Salt Lake City. One of its missions is to overcome among selected students, who represent nearly all the western tribes and a few eastern ones, low performance indicators in basic learning skills.

Since American Indian youth attend Intermountain from throughout the United States, it is possible that most American Indian language groups would be represented in the school. But apart from the native language spoken, how do American Indian children and youth compare in language achievement with other minorities?

Data from studies conducted by the National Institute of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics reveal that American Indian children are not the lowest achievers among minorities represented in schools.

In all age groups, both Blacks and Hispanics performed below the national means on achievement tests in five learning areas: social studies, science, math, career and occupational development and reading. This tendency was constant for 9, 13, and 17 year-olds in school.

However, there are some other questions which arise if we compare differences between and among ethnic and culture groups. One question is: to what extend do the differences among ethnic groups explain differences among individual students within each ethnic group? The group means of Blacks, Whites, Orientals, Mexican-Americans and American Indians were group and weighted on achievement and compared with other means of the same ethnic groups on family background, area of residence and school. The results of these findings are remarkably unlike the findings on achievement standards alone.

When factors other than achievement are controlled for, American Indians rank somewhere in the middle of the six ethnic groups noted above.

Differences between human population groups, like all comparative data, must be treated with caution. Exact figures are not always available. There are major differences in grade levels, principally because drop-out rates differ among minority groups. At the higher grade levels, each ethnic group has a more select population to draw upon for sampling.

One of the more troubling questions has always been, does a student in school, who speaks a language other than that spoken at school have an impediment to school performance? It would naturally appear that the answer to this question would be a resounding yes. However, the National Institute of Education study revealed that although the incidence of languages other than English is great enough to allow for the determination of an appreciable relationship between achievement and language there does not appear to be a strong relationship. The differences that do exist can largely be explained by socioeconomic factors.

In fact, the study showed that only 24 percent of achievement differences could be explained by membership in any particular ethnic group. And that is the maximum percentage of difference. Almost 23 percent of a student ethnic or racial group membership, and its relationship with achievement, could be explained by differences that are primarily social in nature and origin. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the commonly presumed differences in schooling achievement cannot be lightly attributed to inherent characteristics or dispositions.

What can we conclude from a brief analysis of national data summarizing achievement among ethnic and minority group, especially American Indians?

First, that American Indian students as a group when compared with other predominate ethnic groups fall somewhere in the middle, roughly behind Orientals and Whites, but ahead of Blacks and Hispanics.

Second, that if we compare and factor in all relevant information that is non-achievement in school, that similar but not identical findings occur. Again, American Indian students fall somehwere in the middle ranking of all ethnic groups.

Third, that although the lack of power to read and speak English is obviously a handicap to learning and schooling achievement, it alone cannot account for the largest variable which appears to influence schooling--socioeconomic status.

Fours, and lastly, that although membership in a particular ethnic or minority group accounts for about 20+ percent in schooling achievement, this fact alone does not explain the major differences among groups in terms of achievement. The principal variable influencing schooling achievement, as has been deomonstrated in other studies of international achievement levels between countries, are the home variable and socioeconomic status.

However, no school, including Intermountain, can control the socioeconomic status of its entering students. What it can control is the management of its instructional activities that focus on the lesser causes of learning impediments. This leads us to a discussion of what kind of program to plan.

When we consider the availability and appropriateness of assessment instruments for testing language proficiency for American Indian students, both from a technical as well as cultural perpective, we confront both a lack of instruments and a controversy surrounding their use.

For example, an analysis of the National Institute of Education's report Assessment Instruments for Limited English Speaking Students, contains only information pertaining to Navjaos. Currently, the Navajo population at Intermountain is about 10 percent. However, in NIE's booklet of assessment instruments, there is an instrument that is both technical and culturally acceptable. It is the Test of Oral Language Proficiency, developed in the late 1960's by the Southwest Cooperative Educational Laboratory in Albuquerque. By contrast, the California Achievement Test, the only one authorized for use by the BIA, is technically acceptable, but not culturally acceptable. The Test of Oral Language Proficiency has been developed since 1968, tested, validated, and is now in use throughout the United States. It has been used with all kinds of non-English speaking students, most recently Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugee students.

The first project objective is to determine the number of students from different tribal and language groups who have the lowest oral language proficiency scores from both the Oral Language Test and the California Achievement Test.

The California Achievement Test, mandated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is, of course, a standardized test, and a word about them is in order. The exclusive use of standardized tests, although widely practiced throughout the education establishment, is unwarranted as the sole indicator of learning progress within an individual school. A standardized test, like the California Achievement Test, is norm-referenced. Norm-referenced tests measure an individual's performance on the test in relation to how well other students of similar age and background have performed on that same test. The results of norm-referenced tests do reveal comparative differences, but only in relation to differences in statistical populations of students, and not necessarily individual student performance. Data from standardized tests may or may not help in judging the strengths and weaknesses of a school's curricula.

It is also important to point out what standardized achievement tests do not reveal. They do not yield information about student aptitudes, interests or concerns.

Limited, comparative data, usually in achievement, can be gleaned from standardized tests. But in order to plan a more flexible and humane approach to curriculum development and instruction, every school must rely on its own resources to gather information about its students.

To combat the persistent problems of low achievement, poor reading skills, and nagging absenteeism, Intermountain has developed, in cooperation with the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Indian Education, such a project whose primary mission is to reduce substantially the number of students who score below the acceptable norm in grade equivalency on oral language skills.

ANALYSIS OF LEARNING NEEDS

Throughout the academic year beginning in 1981, project management has accummulated student profile learning data from a variety of sources: 1) test scores from the Oral Language Test of the Southwestern Cooperative Educational Laboratory; 2) test scores from the California Achievement Test; 3) student perception scores of their own native language speaking and understanding ability, and their English speaking and understanding ability. Each of these data sources will be discussed in detail.

1. The SWCEL Test of Oral Language Proficiency

The Oral Language Test from SWCEL was chosen because the National Institute of Education's booklet, "Assessment Instruments for Limited English Speaking Students, A Needs Assessment," mentions the SWCEL Test as the only assessment instrument that is both technically and culturally acceptable for American Indian use. (Navajo speakers were the only American Indian group surveyed). It was the first test administered for use in this project by Intermountain project staff. Two project staff were trained in Albuquerque in early September, 1981. This training lasted one full week. Staff learned how to administer the test and how to interpret it.

Students who take the SWCEL Oral Language Proficiency Test score in one of the following categories.

Group I Scores from 0-100

Students who score in this category have little or no knowledge of English. Those who score close to 100 may be capable of producing some well-pronounced sentences, and sentences which are grammatically correct. But they will also frequently alternate those incorrect responses with ungrammatical sentences and phrases. (No students in this program scored in this category).

Group II Scores from 101-130

Students who score in this category have difficulty understanding the test items. Pronunciations or requests for responses are often met with silence. However, they are sufficiently in command to communicate using poor pronunciation. (No students scored in this category).

Group III Scores from 131-150

Students who score in this category do not usually do so without some prompting from the examiner. However, they still use poor sentence structure and phrase construction. Their language ability can be said to be transitional. They make errors less frequently. It is possible their language developmental capacity is still in a maturing process. (Three students from the program fell in this category on the pre-test).

Group IV Scores from 151-170

Students who score in this group (the mean score of the project students was 168) are competent speakers in English. They might be considered slightly awkward speakers by middle class standards, although they do understand syntactic speech and sentence phraseology and construction. (Fourteen students from the project fell into this category on the pre-test).

Group V Scores from 171-226

Students who score in this category are excellent speakers of English. Their use and command of language usually eliminates their need for oral language proficiency improvement. If there are language problems, they are usually with the use of the auxiliary verb and with the use of negatives. (Sixteen students scored in this category).

A diagnostic analysis of the pre-test scores of the SWCEL Test for Oral Language Proficiency revealed the following evidence:

* The average test score was 168 (Category IV) (For the Control Group it was 166)
* The highest test score was 205 (For the control group the highest score was 181)
* The lowest test score was 140 (Group III) (For the control group it was 126. (Group II)

It is possible that a shy student (or anxious, or contentious or troubled) would simply not respond to test items because of the strangeness of the test situation and the unfamiliarity with the test examiner. In fact, an analysis of this low test score of one student revealed that her low score was because she had missed all eight of the first questions asked. It is possible that her low score was attributable to shyness rather than lack of knowledge.

SCORES ON

PRE-TEST OF ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TEST (SWCEL)

BY CATEGORIES

	I		II		III		IV		V	
	0 - 100		101 - 130		131 - 150		151 - 170		171 - 226	
	NOS.	%	NOS.	%	NOS.	%	NOS.	%	NOS.	%
TREATMENT GROUP	0	0%	0	0%	3	8%	14	41%	16	47%
CONTROL GROUP			1	3%	4	12%	11	35%	15	48%

2. California Achievement Test Data

The California Achievement Test (hereafter referred to as the CAT) has ten levels. Almost all students in this program scored on level 14, which their overall achievement level in prereading, reading, spelling, languages, mathematics, and reference skills placed between the middle of the third grade (3.5), and the upper limits of the fourth grade (4.9).

In terms of overall language ability, students have an exceptional range.

* Students have a grade equivalent range from the lower third grade (3.2) to the lower twelfth grade (12.2).
* One student who scored in only the second quartile of those who took the OLP test, scored in the twelfth grade equivalency on total language on the CAT test (the 99 percentile of the school and the 82 percentile nationally).
* The average student has a grade equivalent of the higher end of the sixth grade (6.0).

However, an analysis of the overall test scores from the first year class entering Intermountain on the CAT show that the scores of those admitted into the project are approximately representative of the class population, at least in the lower levels. The majority of project students are roughly one to two grade levels below their fellow classmates in overall language ability. There are individual differences of great variation, of course.

3. Student Perceptions of their Own Language Ability

A test score of overall language ability as revealed by the CAT is, however, not necessarily an indication of language ability in general, because the CAT measures achievement in English.

The project management thought it necessary, therefore, to conduct an informal survey in the fall of 1981 to test students' perceptions of their own language ability both in English and their own native language...both in speaking and understanding abilities.

All students were asked to rank themselves, on a scale of from 0-10, on their ability to speak and understand their own language, and on their ability to speak and understand English. (0 = poorest; 10 = highest)

Students said that they spoke English, on the average, (Scale from 0-10) 7.39 and understood English 8.25. But they also said that, on the average, they spoke their own native language 5.53, and understood it 6.35.

39 percent of the students surveyed indicated that they speak and understand their native language better than English. Conversely, 54 percent say they speak and understand English better than their native language. There does not appear to be any tribal or nation pattern of linguistic ability.

However, with very few exceptions, students in the project are bilingual, and reasonably proficient in their language. They are also reasonably proficient in English as well. There are no reliable tests that measure their tribal language ability. About a third of those surveyed are most proficient in their native language than they are in English, and about 7 percent say they have comparable ability in both languages. (See the chart on Students' Perceptions).

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE ABILITY

NATIVE LANGUAGES AND LEVELS OF ABILITY

NATIVE LANGUAGE	PERCENTAGE OF REPRESENTATION	NATIVE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AVERAGES SCALE: 0-10		ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AVERAGES SCALE: 0-10	
		SPEAKING	UNDERSTANDING	SPEAKING	UNDERSTANDING
PAPAGO	39%	6.27	6.90	7.63	8.18
APACHE	21%	9.00	9.00	5.66	7.16
PIMA	14%	3.25	5.25	6.5	8.5
SIOUX	7%	1.00	4.00	10.00	10.00
MUCKLESHOOT	3%	1.00	1.00	9.00	8.00
MENOMINEE	3%	3.00	3.00	8.00	10.00
PASSAMAQUADDY	3%	3.00	5.00	10.00	10.00
WARM SPRINGS	3%	9.00	0.00	10.00	10.00
NAVAJO	3%	10.00	10.00	6.00	6.00

COMPARISONS OF MEANS ON ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TEST SCORES AND SCORES OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SPEAKING ABILITY

ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY (Modified Mean Score)	74.5
ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPEAKING PROFICIENCY (Mean Modified)	73.9
NATIVE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY (Modified Mean Score)	55.3

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE ABILITY:

NATIVE VERNACULAR VS ENGLISH

	PERCENTAGES
NATIVE LANGUAGE ABILITY OVER ENGLISH	39%
ENGLISH ABILITY OVER NATIVE LANGUAGE	54%
EQUAL ABILITY IN ENGLISH AND NATIVE LANGUAGE	7%

NATIVE LANGUAGES REPRESENTED

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE ABILITY

(By Modified Mean Scores on a Scale 0-10)
(0 = poorest; 10 = highest)

	NATIVE LANGUAGE		ENGLISH	
	SPEAK	UNDERSTAND	SPEAK	UNDERSTAND
MEAN	5.53	6.35	7.39	8.25

As a general rule, students say they are more proficient in English than in their native language, both in speaking and understanding. However, students from two of the nine tribes represented indicated higher proficiency in their native language than in English.

There are, of course, several limitations with the use of ranked scales, and asking students to rank their own abilities. First, we have to assume that in all instances there is an absence of personal bias, and objectivity regarding a personal competence. Obviously, this is not always the case, especially among young adolescents.

Moreover, there is a question about the accuracy of the perceptions, and their correlation with other objective test scores on similar traits and abilities.

Nevertheless, there is some usefulness in this kind of simple measure and it does yield information that is helpful in curriculum planning and in instructional effectiveness. Perhaps amazingly, as if to confirm this hypothesis, there is surprising correlation evident from an analysis of mean scores--somewhat modified for comparison--of both the Oral Language Proficiency Test and the Student Perception Survey of Language Ability. There is less than one percentage point difference (0.6%). This modified mean score on the OLP is 74.5, and the modified mean for the perception survey is 73.9. It may be only circumstantial and coincidental, but this result tends to lend credence to both the efficacy of the standardized OLP test and also to the student perceptions of their own ability.

SUMMARY

What can we conclude from this brief analysis of learning needs and preliminary findings?

First, that most students admitted to the oral language project really are deficient in language skills. As ninth graders, they are at the sixth grade reading level using standardized instruments.

Second, that there is positive correlation between their reading level, overall language ability, and oral language proficiency. (At this time there is no evidence that improvement in one dimension equals improvement in another, although that would be a legitimate hypothesis.)

Third, that most students are moderately proficient in their native language, and that there is some possibility that the learning of English creates language interference problems.

Although several educational delivery systems are possible, depending on which approach one wishes to proceed, the project staff has decided to focus on the improvement of oral language in English.

It will be unlikely that project staff will be able to pinpoint the causes or sources of learning disability and reading and oral language deficiency in American Indian students at Intermountain or elsewhere.

Until more accurate and reliable measures of persuasion are found and validated, the profession and its teaching personnel must rest content with improving basic learning skills without always knowing the psychomotor, neurological psychological, or cognitive (or some combination) that might impair or inhibit learning improvement.

Experimenting with the interaction of student aptitudes with various treatments (in this case of variety of relevant curricular materials designed to improve reading and oral language development) is not only scientifically

acceptable, it is the only known method for discovering new knowledge about the conditions of learning and what approaches work best with which kind of students.